

News Release

For Immediate Release

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NEW PILOT PROGRAM WILL LINK FRESH VEGETABLE FARMERS, CUSTOMERS IN 2 COUNTIES

(Jackson, MS) State officials today announced a pilot program designed to help some of the most needy residents of two Mississippi counties. "I am pleased to announce that, beginning July 1, the State of Mississippi is joining the national Farmers Market Nutrition Program," said Lester Spell, Jr., Commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC). "This program will help agriculture, families and local farmers in Hinds and Bolivar Counties."

The Farmers Market Nutrition Program (FMNP) is currently established in 30 states and 3 Indian Tribal Organizations (including the Mississippi Band of Choctaw Indians). Its mission is to provide a limited benefit (\$14 per year per state recipient) in the form of coupons to low-income, nutritionally at-risk women, infants and children. In addition, the program seeks to expand the use of farmers markets and increase consumption of fresh, nutritious fruits and vegetables.

The program is administered by the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce (MDAC) and the Women, Infants and Children's (WIC) health program. Coupons or vouchers will be distributed through the WIC program to WIC clients in Hinds and Bolivar Counties in addition to their standard food package. The coupons can only be used to purchase fresh fruits and vegetables from farmers' markets. "We all know the importance of fresh vegetables as part of an appropriate diet," said Dr. Ed Thompson, State Health Officer. "Growing vegetables is a major component of Mississippi's agricultural activity, and using those fresh vegetables as part of our WIC program lets us capitalize on one of our strengths."

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The pilot programs will be conducted in Bolivar County in the delta and Hinds County in central Mississippi. Only WIC participants in those two counties will be eligible to participate in 1998. Officials hope to reach a total of about 4,000 people the first year (1,500 in Bolivar County and 2,500 in Hinds County). “It’s a proven program,” says Curtis Jordan, Director of WIC in Mississippi. “The farmers market program is 8 years old nationwide and several states in the southeast were part of the initial program. What we are doing in Mississippi is modeled on successful programs in North and South Carolina,” says Jordan. In Bolivar County, coupons will be redeemed at a new farmers market to be established in Mound Bayou. In Hinds County, customers can redeem their coupons at the Farmers’ Central Market in Jackson.

A 1996 survey of the national program showed its popularity. The survey of WIC participants found that 71% ate more fresh fruit and vegetables and that 92% felt that they obtained a higher quality produce at farmers' markets. The same survey revealed that 88% of farmers said that the program increased their sales and nearly half increased their production of fruit and vegetables.

Agriculture officials say going to a farmers market benefits everyone, whether they are in a program like FMNP or not. “Everyone should know the freshest vegetables are found at a farmers’ market,” said Commissioner Spell. “Programs like this raise awareness of, and activity in, these important outlets.” The program will run from July 1 to October 31.